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Hunza

CHAPTER 29

Hunzan Crafts and Skills

THE NEXT MORNING Jahangir came to our quarters just as I was ready to leave for breakfast. Cec again remained in bed on the doctor's advice.

The Mir was waiting for us in his bright, pleasant sun room when we entered and with him was another handsome, beaming man whom he introduced as his brother, Ayesh, who had just returned from a trip up country.

It is customary for the Mir's oldest brother to remain unmarried and act as an advisor, assistant, secretary or whatever else this position might be termed. He also acted as the Mir's emissary and was the engineer of the electric light outfit in operation at the palace.

We were then ushered into the dining room for breakfast. The Mir, Ayesh and the Rani seated themselves just to keep us company and of course add delight and conversation while we breakfasted.

I had never seen oil made or rendered from any fruit, food or grain and I asked if I could be allowed to witness this process from the beginning. Arrangements were made and I went to visit a plain ordinary Hunzan house where the mistress was prepared and willing to demonstrate the making of apricot oil. 252

The lady and some of her children sat on the floor with a neat stack of apricot stones beside them. Then she and one of her youngsters took each individual stone and split it open with a rock. The meats were taken out and piled into a stone mortar. Then, when they had filled the mortar, the lady got her pestle and began to pound the kernels until they were made into a meal. Next, she rubbed it with her hands until it was worked into a paste. This she placed into an iron skillet, which was placed over a three-sided stone stove. Then she broke up some small chips of wood that she had ready, ignited them and moved the pan about over the heat until it began to warm up. She kept rubbing and kneading the meal with her hands in the skillet until it got quite warm—but not hot, for she used her hands for turning it in the pan. [412]

Then, she lifted up the mass and put it into a round, solid, earthenware or stone receptacle about 12 inches in diameter, with the sides about two or two and a half inches high. She kneaded this with her fingers and knuckles firmly, much more firmly than one would in kneading dough for bread. [415]

Then, a tablespoonful of water was poured over the meal and the massaging process was continued. It was explained to me that sometimes tea is used instead of water. If the pits are bitter pits from the wild fruit, plain water is used, but for sweet pits from the propagated apricots salt water is used.

The bitter pits are gathered from the trees that grow [222] [373]

252 wild in various parts of the area. The oil rendered from
[222] these kernels is probably used only for lighting, because
[373] it is poisonous. Due to their heavy content of prussic
acid, a handful of them is considered deadly. In Ni-
[762] agara, if somebody wants to commit suicide, he jumps over Niagara Falls; in Hunza, they eat a batch of wild apricot kernels.

The kneading process is continued and the vessel is kept tilted so the oil runs down and forms a small pool. As the oil begins to form, the kneading becomes even more vigorous until every drop of oil possible is extracted. While the rendering of the oil may be hard on the knuckles, nothing could be simpler and the resulting product is probably the most healthful and finest fat product that human hands can produce.

[231] The pulp that remains after the oil[1] is extracted is
[302] fed to milk-giving goats, sheep or cows, and is often used as a concoction or shampoo in which the Hunzans wash their heads. The oil of course is used in cooking, baking, frying, for lighting—and even for the hair.

[461] The good woman who performed the oil extracting task for me did not seem to be the least bit overburdened or taxed from this sort of arduous work. It probably would have been a hard day's work for a Western woman.

I would like to stress at this point that the heating process was not a cooking process in any sense of the word. Just a slight warming was all that was needed.

251 The apricot oil is never rendered and stored in casks
252 or otherwise, like many other people do with their oils. They may make sufficient to last them a few days but not more. This is poured into an earthen vessel or a bottle, if available. When a further supply is required, the pits are cracked and they go through the entire process as outlined.

1 [i.e. - oil from apricot seeds - ANALYST]